

# Introduction

The army of North Korea, with the diplomatic and military support of the Soviet Union, launched a powerful attack against the Republic of Korea (ROK) on 25 June 1950. Less than six months previously, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in a speech to the National Press Club, had delineated the United States (U.S.) first line of defense in Asia, emphasizing the off-shore archipelago stretching from Japan to Taiwan and on to the Philippines, but not mentioning the Korean Peninsula. The Soviets, initially inclined to restrain the Communist regime in the north, now interpreted this omission as an invitation to back North Korean aggression in the south.

Korea's central position in Asia had long been the source of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian interest, as well as interest on the part of the U.S. Historically, Korea had been under the control of China, but the Japanese defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 eliminated the Chinese political influence. That defeat left both Imperial Russia and Japan competing for influence in Korea, with U.S. interests a distant third. After Japan's surprise attack on Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), only the U.S. remained as a weak competitor to Japan in Korea. By 1922, the Japanese had displaced the U.S. and all other foreign competition and controlled Korea.



With Japan thoroughly defeated at the end of World War II, the U.S. and the Soviet Union divided Korea at the 38th Parallel. Soviet troops occupied the northern half, while the U.S. occupied the more populous south, including the national capital, Seoul. The leaders of both superpowers recognized the Korean peninsula's strategic potential. Vladivostok was only 80 miles northeast of the Soviet border with North Korea. China, 125 miles to the west of South Korea, lay across the Yellow Sea, and Japan was about the same distance to the east, beyond the Sea of Japan. Despite its strategic importance in Asia, Korea was little known elsewhere. Many regarded the nation only by its ancient designation, the "Hermit Kingdom."

In 1947 the U.S. brought the matter of reunification of Korea before the United Nations (UN), and the General Assembly resolved to hold an election in the spring of 1948 for both Koreas to elect one National Assembly. About 95 percent of the registered voters in the south voted, but the Soviets blocked participation in the north. On 17 July 1948 the National Assembly in Seoul established Korea's first constitution in 4,000 years. One month later, American military government below the 38th Parallel ended with the establishment of the Republic of South Korea. In September 1948 the Soviets created a communist state in the north called the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, with its capital at P'yongyang. The U.S. began withdrawing

combat troops, and in June 1949, only the U.S. Army's Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) of about 500 people remained to continue training Korean forces.

As a result of the UN-sponsored election, the General Assembly acknowledged the ROK as the only valid Korean government and continued to work toward reunification. Thirty-two foreign nations formally recognized the republic, but a Soviet veto denied the South Koreans UN membership. Despite the UN's willingness to be flexible on the nature of a government for a reunited Korea, the North Koreans and Soviets stonewalled. Clearly, reunification would be a difficult goal. Both Kim Il Sung's Soviet-supported regime in the north and strongman Syngman Rhee's government in the south were autocratic administrations, utterly unwilling to compromise with the regime on the other side of the 38th Parallel.

The officials in P'yongyang concluded that Korea could be united only by force. Accordingly, the North Korean Peoples' Army attacked South Korea at approximately 0400 on 25 June 1950. The South Korean army resisted but had to retreat in the face of better-armed North Korean forces. North Korea's ground forces consisted of seven assault infantry divisions, a 6,000-man tank brigade, an independent infantry regiment, a motorcycle regiment, border constabulary, army and corps headquarters personnel, and three reserve divisions—a total ground force of 135,000, supported by ample

armor and artillery. Against this host, the ROK Army could muster some 94,800 men, with no tanks, no medium artillery, and no recoilless rifles. Moreover, South Korea's Air Force consisted of only 22 propeller-driven trainers and liaison aircraft. KMAC had 10 F-51s available, but no Korean pilots had been trained for the Mustangs. The North Koreans supported their land forces with at least 180 aircraft, including 40 YAK fighters, and 70 Ilyushin ground-attack bombers.

Concerned about the fate of the strategically-placed peninsula, American officials brought the North Korean aggression to the United Nations Security Council less than six hours after learning of the invasion. The Soviet's UN delegate, Yakov Malik, might have been expected to veto any possible Security Council response. Ironically, he was boycotting because of the Council's refusal to recognize Communist China instead of the Nationalist regime. With the Soviet representative deliberately absent, the Security Council voted 9-0 with one abstention, calling upon the North Koreans to withdraw and asking UN members to refrain from assisting the aggressors. Two days later, a second Security Council resolution recommended that the members of the UN assist the ROK in repelling the armed attack from the north.

Meanwhile, the U.S. independently took steps to aid South Korea. On 25 June, President Harry Truman directed the Commander in Chief, Far East, General of

the Army Douglas MacArthur, in Tokyo, to send ammunition and equipment to the ROK forces, along with a survey team to assess the situation. The president's response was immediate, but it also was remarkably measured. The U.S. government had long understood the difficulties involved in projecting force onto the Asian mainland from American bases in Japan. Still, the North Korean Army was advancing unchecked.

On 26 June, General MacArthur reported from Tokyo that South Korean forces could not hold the capital of Seoul, a North Korean plane had been shot down, and an evacuation of American nationals was underway. Truman then ordered air and naval forces to provide cover and support to South Korean forces south of the 38th Parallel. By the morning of 29 June the situation in Korea was serious as Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson called President Truman to brief him. In response, Truman authorized General MacArthur to use supporting ground units in Korea. He also directed the U.S. Air Force against targets in the north and ordered the U.S. Seventh Fleet deployed to the Formosa Straits to insulate the Chinese Communists and the Nationalists from one another in Taiwan. That same day MacArthur flew from Japan to Korea and back. The Commander in Chief, Far East, saw with his own eyes the rapidly deteriorating military situation. His report to Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins went next to Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr., who

in turn briefed the president at 0457 on 30 June. At midmorning President Truman announced his decision to send two American divisions from Japan to Korea and to establish a naval blockade of North Korea.

On 7 July, the efforts of the U.S. and the UN merged. Since other UN members intended to send men and materiel to Korea, the Security Council authorized the unified command in Korea to use the UN flag in the course of operations against the North Koreans and asked the U.S. to designate the commander of unified forces. The next day Truman named General MacArthur as Commander in Chief, United Nations Command. The new UN commander appointed Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker, Eighth Army com-

mander, to direct all UN ground forces in Korea. There was no turning back now. The U.S. was committed to a major land war in Asia, one that would grow even more bitter with the entry of Communist Chinese forces.

It proved to be a conflict that would test the U.S. Army in general, and the skills and adaptability of the U.S. Army engineers in particular. Both the harsh and rugged nature of Korea's terrain and the ebb and flow of combat operations forced the engineers to build, to fight, to destroy, and to rebuild. From the very onset of hostilities until the truce talks years later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers played a significant role in the Korean War. 🏰